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ABSTRACT

Views concerning study of the liberal arts and its future are offered. It is suggested that a liberal arts education has a public purpose: it develops skills needed by citizens to be active in the community. Studying the humanities (literature, philosophy, religion, music, and the fine arts) for self-expression, self-fulfillment, and self-development is for private, rather than public, purposes. In each society, the education that the citizen requires to be active in the community depends on its type of constitution. A liberal arts education may not be identified with particular subject matters, but rather with skills in communication, problem-solving, and leadership. From the Renaissance through the middle of the 19th century a liberal arts education was synonymous with the mastery of the Latin and Greek classics. Today colleges debate the relative merits of the humanities and the sciences, and most recently the focus has shifted to the advantages of career education. Since many individuals currently function within corporate or bureaucratic systems, it is proposed that the following skills are needed: persuasive skills, mastering of statistics, the ability to convey information graphically, an understanding of economics, and command of the written and spoken word. (SW)

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THE FUTURE OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the Gentleman?

Peasant Revolt of 1381

I am here this afternoon to probe a question that is literally as old as Aristotle. I have no expectation that I shall be any more successful in laying this question to rest than he was 2500 years ago. But I do hope in the course of this analysis to give you a clue why each generation is forced to ask anew the same question that Aristotle raised in his Politics: What is a proper education for a free-born citizen?

Let me first, however, take note of the hand-wringing that goes on over the current state of the liberal arts. In a recent report Sandy Astin of UCLA decried the sharp drop since the late 1960's in the percentage of college freshmen who intend to major in English, a foreign language, mathematics, history or philosophy. Indeed the proportion of freshmen listing English or math as intended majors is 80 percent lower today than twenty years ago.

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Astin, like many others, deplores this trend away from value-oriented education. There is even a hint in his report that today's college students are morally inferior to those of twenty or thirty years ago because they are more likely to give "financial well-being" as a reason for going to college than "developing a meaningful philosophy of life".

Astin, of course, is not alone in his concern about this drift away from a liberal education. There is a veritable mountain of reports, commissions, and studies deploring the current state of the liberal arts. You will forgive me if I adopt a somewhat skeptical tone toward these documents. I approach them with the same reservations that I bring to the literature on smoking from the American Tobacco Institute or the admonition from my dentist to visit him twice yearly.

Colleges market something called a liberal arts education. Not only is it good for you but there is some suggestion that <u>to be good</u> one should have pursued these studies. Those of us who have lived with a college faculty — or in lieu of that seen "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf"— may suspect that ideology, that is, truth presented from a self-interested point of view, is at work here. To examine the question more carefully, let me distinguish the humanities from the liberal arts by the different purposes for which we study them.

The humanities — the study of literature, philosophy, religion, music and the fine arts — have as a purpose self-expression, self-fulfillment and self-development. These are private rather than public goods. The liberal arts are another matter. From the very beginning a liberal education has had a public purpose.

For Aristotle, as for Cicero, a liberal arts education is at its roots a political concept. It is the education that a free-born citizen requires in order to play an active part in the life of his city. For the Ancients a liberal education was not, as we Moderns sometimes put it, an education that liberates. Indeed, it would have been incomprehensible to a Greek or a Roman to think of giving a slave a liberal education. Its goal, as Aristotle defines it in the Politics, is "knowing how to govern like a free man and how to obey like a free man".

You may object that I am engaged in mere logic-chopping here. Surely the same course of study may be both an exercise in self-expression and a preparation for a leadership role. How could I deny it. But my experience with higher education leads me to believe that it is much more common for faculty and students to ignore the public purpose of the liberal arts, to pursue these studies as a form of knowledge for its own sake. In most of our colleges and universities undergraduate subject matter in the

liberal arts has taken on a life of its own, studied with little or no regard for the public purposes to which liberal education is intended. F. Scott Fitzgerald's wisecrack in The Great Gatsby that the liberal arts produce "that most limited of all specialists, 'the well-rounded man'" is a backhanded tribute to the Princeton of his time. A student concentrating in English or history in that day became something more than a Ph.D. manque'. In our day we have tended to define a liberal education as if it were a particular set of courses or subject matters. By ignoring the public purpose of a liberal education, we have committed that most elemental of philosophical sins: confusing means with ends.

The content of a liberal education, that is, preparation for the public life of a particular community will differ, as Aristotle pointed out, according to the particular form of government under which a citizen is to live, "being educated in a democratic spirit in a democracy and in an oligarchic spirit in an oligarchy". If we follow Aristotle in this, might we not say that a liberal education in Calvin's Geneva will differ from that in Jefferson's Virginia, or the Iran of the Ayatollah Khomeini? Iran today has a new liberal arts curriculum. The Koran and other Islamic writings have replaced Persian literature as the core of discourse. The theocracy of the mullahs requires a different form of communication and persuasion than that used in the autocracy of the Shah. In each society the education that the free-born citizen

requires in order to play an active role in the life of the community will be conditioned by the form of constitution under which each lives. A liberal arts education so defined is not culture-bound. It need not, even in the Western tradition, be identified with particular subject matters, but rather with the skills in communication, problem-solving and leadership that are appropriate to a given community at a given point in time.

From the Renaissance through the middle of the 19th century a liberal arts education was synonymous with the mastery of the Latin and Greek classics. This was not knowledge for its own sake. One could not read Newton's Optics much less law or medicine without Latin as one's second language. Even Greek was career-oriented, learned with an eye to gaining a place in the Church. As one wag put it in the time of the first Queen Elizabeth: "If any man could understand Greek, there was a Deanery for him, if Latin, a good living".

When the connection between public life and the classical languages was finally broken, no universally accepted definition of the liberal arts replaced them. Instead we began to suffer from what C.P. Snow called the "crisis of two cultures". Colleges became a battleground over the relative merits of the humanities and the sciences, the literate vying with the numerate for control of the curriculum. More recently the focus has shifted to

the merits of career education verses "knowledge for its own sake". What becomes clear in these often sterile debates is that, in the end, these issues are not decided by educators. As Sandy Astin's studies show, the public has voted with its feet. Rapidly falling enrollment in a discipline is ordinarily a sign of societal change beyond any college's control. In our case liberal arts enrollments fell because we were no longer placing one out of three college graduates as teachers in our public schools.

How would we define a liberal arts education in America in the last years of the 20th century, given the public forms under which we live? First, one in every two of us live our lives within a corporation or bureaucracy. We are office-holders with a niche in a hierarchy of office-holders whom we try to lead, influence, or, as a last resort, obey. Those whom we deal with outside our own hierarchy are also likely to be office holders subject to the same constraints that we are. What are the common forms of communication, problem-solving and leadership in a corporation or bureaucracy?

Inside a particular corporate hierarchy few of us ever communicate with our peers or superiors in the way Mario Cuomo, for example, addressed his peers at the Democratic National Convention. For us the common form of communication is the memo, the meeting or, more demanding, the presentation. Where do you learn to be effective in running a meeting, motivating your staff or convincing your

superiors of a particular course of action? Is this mere training? Cicero would not have thought so. For him as for most educated men until the middle of the 19th century, the study of rhetoric, that is the art of communication and persuasion, was the crown of a liberal arts education. Have our colleges developed a new rhetoric appropriate to the public lives that we actually live. One thinks of the Oxford Union as an example of a deliberate and explicit attempt to train students in the extemporaneous speaking style of the British Parliament.

[Frank Newman suggested at the New Jersey college association meeting that while my description of "public life" in a corporation may have been appropriate for the immediate post-war years, it is ill-suited to a highly competitive world economy. In a new entrepreneurial age, an education that is oriented toward success in a bureaucracy will not be useful in a world of rapidly changing technology. If he is right, a liberal arts curriculum would stress a teaching style that encouraged students to challenge the conventional wisdom, one that would promote creativity and innovation].

I won't pretend that I am clever enough to describe in detail what a liberal arts curriculum for public life within a corporation would look like. But let me throw out a few suggestions. Clearly every student would master statistics. It is at the heart not only of the new rhetoric but of the sciences as well. The art of communication and persuasion also requires a keen sense of how information can be conveyed graphically -- both in charts and in metaphor. Economics, whether its Marxist form in the East or its

free-market counterpart in the West, has become a key analytic tool by which we choose, organize and give meaning to a vast ocean of information. Economics has become for us in our public discourse what Scripture was to Augustine or the works of Aristotle to Aquinas, an intellectual framework to interpret reality. Finally, command of the written and spoken word — especially the spoken word — is an essential leadership skill. Speaking across the curriculum should be as common a liberal arts strategy as writing across the curriculum has become.

In much of the rhetoric that surrounds the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake as opposed to education for a career, we find an implicit, and sometimes explicit, denial that career education can be creative. Creativity is not the exclusive property of the liberal arts. Let me go back to the creation of the modern corporation itself. Before 1850 there was nothing, except perhaps the army, that remotely resembled that complex of human activity that today we call the corporation. Within a span of twenty years with no previous models to go by, an identifiable group of men created the accounting systems, the management techniques and the organizational structure that now pervades our society.

Who were they? What was their education? Benjamin Latrobe of the Baltimore and Ohio, J. Edgar Thompson of the Pennsylvania Railroad, McCallum of the Erie and McClellan of the Illinois Central were all trained as civil engineers. In the waves of

innovation that followed the Civil War, Theodore Vail of AT&T started as a telegraph operator. Pierre and Irenee Dupont and Alfred Sloan of General Motors graduated as engineers from MIT. The most innovative and pervasive force in American life for the past 130 years was created by men who pursued knowledge not for its own sake but for its utility to society. Theirs was an education that was truly liberal in the Aristotelian sense of the term: it allowed them to create new forms by which free men would freely organize themselves, both to govern and to obey.

Why have I been so insistent that we should distinguish a liberal education from the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake? When knowledge is pursued without regard to its utility, it implies an economic system in which the student lives off others. Whether it was the slave labor of Greece and Rome or the "rack-rents" that provided the endowment income for Newman's Oxford, the leisure to pursue knowledge for its own sake has been sweated from the toil of others.

The 19th century idea of the liberal arts as the proper education for a "gentleman" implied a society in which the few had the right to govern and the many had no choice but to obey. In the Oxford Dictionary of Law a "gentleman" is defined as: a person of private means with no occupation. Gentlemen in Victoria's England did not earn salaries. They lived off the efforts of

others. How demeaning salaried work was is caught in the outburst of an Oxford don when a parliamentary commission confused a college fellowship with a salary:

> Does Lord John Russell know that I can mortgage my Fellowship, that I can make over to a creditor or an assignee the right to receive during my life my share of the revenues of my College? Salary indeed! I have no more salary that Lord John Russell himself and I work less for it.

Implicit and unacknowledged in much of the rhetoric that confuses a liberal education with the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is a social and economic order that we would repudiate if it were fully spelled out to us. Only an education that has a public purpose, that is pursued with a sense of service justifies the enormous transfer of wealth that underwrites our system of higher education. Each of us, if we please, can fund for ourselves the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. A liberal education is deserving of public support, of the taxes of rich and poor, because it serves the interests of all to promote a more bountiful and more just society.